

# The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel

F. MULIYIL

That the Fourth Gospel is an avowedly theological work is generally admitted. The author himself states his purpose in these words:

‘But these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in His name.’

To describe it thus does not imply that the Synoptic gospels in contrast are merely historical and quite innocent of theology! The gospels are not imitations of Greek histories or biographies. The underlying motives and presuppositions of the writers of the New Testament are the same whatever the type of the book—history, biography, epistle, apocalypse, or tract, which together compose the Canon of the New Testament. There is a unity in the New Testament which is original, underlying the diversity of the individual writings which must not be overlooked in analytical and critical study of each part—Dr. C. H. Dodd, in his inaugural lecture in Cambridge, said as long ago as 1936, ‘The Fourth Gospel may well prove to be the keystone of an arch which at present fails to hold together. If we can understand it, understand how it came to be, and what it means, we shall know what early Christianity really was and not until in some measure we comprehend the New Testament as a whole, shall we be in a position to solve the Johannine Problem.’

And what is the ‘Johannine Problem’? To the ordinary reader it consists in the contrast the gospel presents to the first three gospels, called the Synoptic gospels. Is the Fourth Gospel an historical chronological narrative of the ministry of Jesus with theological material interwoven with it or is it a series of theological expositions and the historical material merely editorial or redactional; which is primary and which is secondary? The controversy raged over the question of the historicity of the Fourth Gospel, and reached a stalemate in the conclusion that the Fourth Gospel represented a tradition, independent of the Synoptic history, or as supplementing it.

Albert Schweitzer has said that the “quest of the historical Jesus” is a vain quest. His book of the same title was in many

ways an epoch-making one. It was a protest against the 'historicism' that beset all piecemeal study of the books of the New Testament. Such studies offered nothing but contrasts and obscured the unity of the New Testament. This in turn made interpretation difficult and subjective, and often fanciful. If we eschewed the allegorical method of a previous age, these studies introduced another kind of allegory, the idealism and humanitarianism of the modern age which it was assumed that the New Testament writings anticipated and prefigured. In this pre-occupation their real affinities with the Old Testament history and religion were overlooked, and the associations of the Greek environment of early Christianity exaggerated; and this affected adversely all attempts at interpretation.

The problem of the Fourth Gospel is a characteristic problem of our times. The Synoptic gospels contained the ethical teaching of our Lord which could be adapted to the outlook of the present age and could be made to buttress modern humanism. The apocalyptic elements in them (which are alien to our ways of thought) could be written off as outmoded trappings, or contemporary associations not integrally related to the permanent message of the gospel. The Kingdom of God which is the gospel of Jesus was often allied with an implicit belief in progress. So understood, the Kingdom of God stood out of all relation to other ideas of the New Testament such as eternal life, redemption, judgment, but in actual fact all these ideas form a coherent whole, and none of them can be detached from the others. A selective use of the ideas of the New Testament is denied to us. We cannot choose from the New Testament what we want and reject the rest, as a Hindu feels free to do, and considers a quite legitimate procedure. We are committed to it entire, and in all honesty we must persevere till we discover its inner unity.

Perhaps this statement of the problem is quite modern. But that was not how it was posed in the first and second centuries of the Christian era. The social gospel was not the demand of the age. It was the cosmic gospel. The gnostics were the pioneers in this type of interpretation and the Christian gnostics tried to fit Christ into their cosmological speculations. The result was that Christ became a principle or one of the principles in their schemes of the universe. Such schematizations have little correspondence to history and the actual life of men in the world. The Fourth Gospel reflects this tendency of thought, not in the sense that it emulates it but that it raises a protest against it. Though the prologue might at first mislead the reader, this misconception only relates to the word *Logos* which is abandoned after the momentous statement 'the Word became flesh', and from henceforth, the author is concerned with the 'flesh of the Son of man', which worked redemptively for all mankind. Unlike the gnostics the author does not define Christ in terms of the *logos*, but the *logos* in terms of Christ. In other words he subordinates all cosmology to a soteriology and states that to impart

life to man is the purpose of God, from creation to the end of time. Herein is seen that though Greek thought was a potent environment of the Fourth Evangelist, it did not in any way modify the content of his message to his times.

There was still another element of current thought which is distinct from the cosmological speculations of the Hellenistic culture. That is represented by the Mystery Religions which came from the East. The allegorical method relates to rationalistic speculations as the writings of Philo abundantly testify. On the other hand sacramental acts and mystic symbolism are the language of Mystery Religions. Moreover they were all concerned with the salvation of the individual and his life in a community of the initiated or of the Sect. At first Christianity appeared to be one of the competing cults. But what distinguished it from the rest would certainly constitute one of the essential principles of the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.

What prevented the Fourth Gospel from being depressed into a cultic book is its vital connection with history and particularly with the history of Israel. The author is conversant with the older apologetic, the gospel as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets.

‘We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’

‘We worship that which we know: for salvation is from the Jews.’

It is a vindication of the faith of Israel. The history of Israel could only have such a conclusion, for it is a history compounded of faith and fact. The history itself illustrates this faith, and it is made by the people who held the faith. It is no use asking which is antecedent, the history or the faith. To explain faith as a rationalistic or pietistic interpretation of facts is to put asunder what God has joined together.

All the key words which belonged to the vocabulary of mystery cults are used in the Fourth Gospel, knowledge, light, life, fullness, but they are employed, not to describe the inner illumination of the devotee or the believer, but of a person. He is the light of the world, he gives the living bread, and the water that springs up unto eternal life.

It has been said that the Fourth Gospel is the sacramental gospel, but it enshrines the sacrament of history and not a nature myth. The initiation is not into the mysteries of Nature but into the life of the historical person Jesus Christ, who is prefigured in the story of the people of Israel, beginning with the great patriarch Jacob, the gift of manna the miraculous food, the giving of the Law, the building of the temple. Indeed the book abounds in allusions to the history and institutions of the people of Israel, a concrete history which is the sacrament of the Kingdom of God. The greatest praise our Lord can give to one who lived in this

sacred tradition is contained in the words spoken about Nathanael, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile!' and it is assumed that a true Israelite recognizes in Him the 'Son of God' and the 'King of Israel'.

... All these lead to one great axiom, in the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. The contrast between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel is only superficial, but the inner unity between them is of fundamental importance. In fact the writer shows clear evidences of his knowledge of the Synoptic tradition, but gives that tradition a universal setting by linking the *eschaton* with the creation itself. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' . . . 'And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.' The problem of the gospel is not that of the historicity of the narrative or the discourses. It is the problem of history, of the meaning of the story of man upon the earth.

If the sacred history of the Old Testament is an essential part of the assumptions of the writer, it would seem rather promiscuous that commentators should draw upon Rabbinic commentaries on the Old Testament books to throw additional light on Johannine discourses. It is true that a knowledge of the Rabbinic interpretations of the Scriptures has greatly enhanced our understanding of the gospels. But St. John's method could hardly be described as Rabbinic, nor the Johannine discourses be compared with Rabbinic expositions. The book is not a commentary on the basic text of the Synoptics, but the same story told in a wider context. The writers of the Synoptic gospels give the warning 'that Jesus taught with *authority* and not as their Scribes'. The Rabbinic commentaries are didactic and often contain fanciful exegesis, and unlike the Fourth Gospel they do not have an historical or missionary purpose. The avowed aim of the writer is evangelistic, and one should like to think of him—seminal though his writings are for theology—primarily as an *evangelist*.

The gospel presents a problem not generally envisaged by Western commentators. It is that the gospel is not considered to be a problem in India at all. The Johannine contrast between faith and unbelief disappears completely if the Fourth Gospel is understood as depicting the inner consciousness of Christ, His oneness with the Father, which to the Jews appeared to be a blasphemous claim. Read the gospel against the background of the acosmic monism of the Vedantic philosophy, which is basic to all Hindu and Buddhist religious thought, and the challenge which the gospel presents to faith fades away. This indeed is a missionary problem and I must confess it is hard to find an answer. To the Hindu, Nature, Man and God belong to the one large landscape of religion, and the ascent from one to the other is logical, but of a descent we do not hear, except in the salvation myths of Saivism and Vaishnavism, which in themselves were protests against the rarefied intellectualism of the Vedanta. The

Hindu might claim that the Fourth Gospel is but another illustration of the Vedantic thesis of an ultimate identity of *Atman* and *Brahman*, the individual soul and the universal soul, as a conscious experience of the individual, and he maintains that his philosophy comprehends all scriptures (Vedas) even the Christian Book.

Perhaps an answer to the missionary problem could be found in the study of the Fourth Gospel against the Hellenistic environment, especially in the contrast it presents to the current views, of a fault in the universe or of the imprisoned fragment of the 'pleroma', the spark of the divine light in its material habitation finding its way back through successive stages to its source. The gospel affirms categorically, 'No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.' Or again, 'And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, which is in heaven.' There was a descent, an Incarnation, and all creation, all human longing and aspiration, all history, even the Sacred history, and all Scriptures are brought within its sphere. 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad.'

Faith, which is the characteristic religious response of man, is not an attitude, or quality of the soul, but a venture to believe in God, and directed not towards an idea or an abstraction, a thought or a conception, but to an object outside him, even the person of Christ. For the Christian, Christ fills the universe—this is the purpose of beginning the gospel not at a point of time within history, but 'in the beginning' where our categories of time are transcended. What happened at the incarnation was not a product of human history, but something that created human history and renews it. The story of man properly understood has a beginning and an end, both outside the temporal sphere in which he lives. To apprehend logos in its historical setting is to know life in the sphere of the 'eternal' here and now.

The Hindu, instead of concentrating on the inner experience of the Master, might shift his attention to the devotion of the 'Beloved Disciple', and regard the gospel as an illustration or exposition of Christian piety. This is an aspect of the gospel which has a universal appeal. The promises of Christ to enlighten the individual, to allay his thirst with 'living water', and to satiate his hunger with the 'bread of life', to care for him as the shepherd, to sustain him as the vine sustains the branch, might all be construed as describing the mystical relations between the deity and the worshipper. Bhakti is the Indian word for it. Bhakti religions in India, with their intense longing for release, have been acclaimed as an alternative *marga* (path) to the deity, who is the personification (incarnation!) of the universal soul. It is here the Indian commentators of the Fourth Gospel have found the nearest approach to the Hindu. Christian

Bhakti might offer a parallel, but as parallels they never meet or do they meet in infinity?

It has always made me uneasy when faith which Jesus demands from his disciples (as well as from all men) is translated by the word Bhakti. They do not belong to the same complex of ideas. The former belong to the realm of history and the latter to that of religious consciousness. Bhakti religions usually avoid the challenge which the 'Word of God' presents to faith. There is a Christian mysticism, but it has always followed the acceptance of Jesus' claim to reveal the Father and His victory over the world, sin and death. Therefore Bhakti religions have always tended towards the sect type of religion and to cultic practices. They have no message of hope for a fallen world.

There are several 'devotional' commentaries on the Fourth Gospel. They do give to the Christian the certainty of the things which he has believed and help to foster personal religion and a life of devotion, but rarely if ever succeed in interpreting the gospel as a missionary book, written by an evangelist for the world of his day.

The great majority of people, then as now, are not pre-occupied with religions or ideas. They are frankly secularists. If in modern times the gospel has been presented in the context of an existentialist philosophy which I personally think promises to be a fruitful method of interpretation, one must also remember that there is an atheistic existentialism. Communism purports to be such an ideology. The Fourth Gospel does not evade the issue. The Galilean crowd typifies this vast number who seek 'perishing bread' and Jesus' rebuke is as relevant today as it was then. 'You seek perishing bread, I am the bread of life.'

The fundamental problem of the 'Fourth Gospel' then is the problem of history. It is an attempt to show the gospel as relevant to the life of man on earth, but it is a life not produced by or confined to man's long existence upon the earth. It comes 'from above' and is consummated in the sphere from which it came. But it comes within our experience in the movement of history, both changing us and our times, shaping us and the world after the pattern of a divine history that is at the same time a theodicy, a vindication of God's ways with men. The earthly life of Christ is an epitome of the whole life of man, in the sphere of God. No part of human life and experience, not even pain and suffering is left out so that the moment of his death becomes at the same time the 'hour' of 'glorification'. Jesus is indeed the Lord of life.

Now the basis of all this is the story of the Son of Man, the earthly life of our Lord, and all that followed therefrom. Hence the first need in a commentary is to stick close to history and make the text of the gospel and its meaning as clear as possible. The book under consideration in this article (*The Gospel According to St. John*, C. K. Barrett, S.P.C.K., 63s.) fulfils that task honestly. It is conservative on the whole, but that is not a fault but an

excellence. There is a modicum of introductory material which embodies all that is significant in recent researches into the environment of the gospel in contemporary thought. Old Testament, Judaism, Greek Philosophy and religions of salvation form its non-Christian background and the short paragraphs dealing with them are both clear and apt. There is little tendency to speculation, for the gospel compels one to listen to the words of our Lord, and ponder over the events which the Evangelist describes. The questions that naturally arise in the mind of an evangelist in a non-Christian land are not given much prominence, since that is not the milieu of the present commentator. But the reader can draw the parallels from what has been set forth in the introduction which is both succinct and suggestive. The Christian background of the gospel is then described. The author illustrates the correspondence between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic gospels, St. Paul's letters, and the rest of the Johannine writings. The commentator has shown a sure perception of the unity of the New Testament and of its vital connection with the life of the early Christian Community. 'It is of supreme importance to John', he says, 'that there was a Jesus of Nazareth who lived and died in Palestine; but to give an accurate outline of the outstanding events of the career of this person was no part of his purpose.' The Fourth Gospel, though not widely known or fully understood, nevertheless belonged to the living tradition and history of the early Church.

The section closes with an essay on the influence of the gospel upon the development of theology. The author traces it in the later writings of the New Testament Canon as well as in the early apologists. He says, 'the influence of John in the first half of the second century may perhaps seem far less substantial than might be expected. The reason for this is partly that the gospel remained to a great extent unknown; it did not enter the main stream of the Church's life till later in the century. But it remains a striking fact that the Christian writers of this period were able to handle the problems, which evoked the Fourth Gospel, and yet show no indication that they were aware of the immense and unique contribution John had made to their solution... No Christian thinker before Irenaeus was capable of appropriating and interpreting the Johannine synthesis'.

The section on the 'Theology of the Gospel' is the most important part of the whole book, apart from the commentary. The writer proves with supporting texts from the gospel, and from the New Testament generally, his thesis that 'Johannine theology is not so much the imposition of alien forms and terminology upon primitive Christian thought (though it is expressed partly in new forms and terminology), as the spontaneous development of primitive Christian thought, under the pressure of inner necessity and the lapse of time'. The author does not generally favour the view that John is primarily a mystic, and the gospel as illustrating the mystic experiences of the 'Beloved Disciple',

and this is to his credit. He says, 'For many reasons it is impossible to classify John with the mystics of his age or of any age... John knows no special class of "mystic" Christians any more than he knows a special class of "gnostic" Christians. The state which is described in this semi-mystic terminology is simply the state of Christian salvation perhaps most simply represented by *ἐνεφύσησεν* of 20, 22. Jesus sends his apostles as he has himself been sent by his Father; he breathes into them the Spirit that had rested upon him'. The Introduction closes with an essay on the origin and authority of the gospel. 'It seems right', says the author, 'to emphasize a certain detachment of the gospel from its immediate surroundings; no book ever was less a party tract than John'. This detachment must have puzzled both the Churchmen and the heretics, but they dare not take any liberties with it. The historical core of the book impressed the Christian and resisted all attempts of the speculative philosopher to etherealize it. Our author says, 'From one point of view John is a reaffirmation of history. Both apocalypticism and gnosticism may be regarded as a flight from history. The apocalypticist escapes from the past and the present and enters into a golden age of the future; the gnostic escapes from the past and present into a world of mysticism and fantasy. Over against these John asserted the primacy of history'. One can trace Bultmann's influence in this chapter of an existentialist interpretation of the gospel.

The commentary itself is most carefully written. It is based on the Greek text and fulfils a need that has been keenly felt for a long time, since the publication of Bernard in the I.C.C. over thirty years ago. It is compendious in character and gives all the important variants of the text, and takes note of the significant differences in exegesis, and yet it is not a reference book. The author succeeds to a remarkable extent in recapturing the impression which the words of Jesus made on the original hearers. 'The person of Christ', which is central in the gospel, stands in sharp relief against his times as he does against the modern age. The indexes are exhaustive and there are quite a number of them ranging from Old Testament to modern authors, books and periodicals. One is impressed by the painstaking care, devotion and the wide reading and study that have gone into the writing of this book.

It is said that one may not write a commentary on St. John before one is fifty. But longevity does not always presuppose wisdom. Nevertheless a certain detachment (not withdrawal) which comes with age is necessary to understand a mind so mellowed, and a character so gracious as that of the 'Beloved Disciple'. A commentator is necessarily circumscribed by his environment and it is only by an effort of imagination that he can transport himself to far-off times and climes. What would be the specific needs of India or other lands in the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel may be outside his scope. The present exposition has relevance in the context of the Christian Church and the



culture of the West. A transposition of the gospel of 'eternal life' is the continuing task of the Christian evangelist in every land and generation. A whole lifetime is hardly sufficient to understand and appropriate the 'Words of Life' which our Lord spoke even as the Evangelist adds in his post-script, 'the world itself would not contain the books that should be written' on the theme.

★

(From *The Suffering God*, by C. S. Paul, published by C.L.S., Madras, 1932.)

*When a man is battered on the waves of a storm-tossed sea, will it do for a master swimmer to stand on the shore in safety and beckon to him to come up to the calm shore as best as he can? The master swimmer on the safe shore is comparable to the Brahman in Ananda, free from danger or suffering, but the man on the waves is the sinner whose limited strength is being fast spent. If rescuing strength does not go out from the safe shore he will be overpowered by the waves. Will it not be more in keeping with the circumstances if the master swimmer jumps into the waters to rescue the sinking soul? If he does not do this he will stand self-condemned. Will it not then follow that the greater the Ananda state of the Brahman the greater be His obligation to go out in search of even one wandering soul, and set it on its feet and enable it to realize the divinity that is in it?*

★

*He who seeks joy, let him seek it not in himself to the exclusion of others but in serving and sacrificing for others. Only here does man become more like God. This is the truth of Tat tvam asi that the Christian can accept. The redeeming activity is the inner truth about God and so it must be the inner truth about the redeemed man. Saved to save must be our motto. When we are redeemed we are not called upon to be lost in the Vision Beatific. But we are called upon to be co-workers in the redeeming activity of God for the regeneration of the world and the ushering in of the Kingdom of God when His will will be done on earth as in Heaven.*